Chapter 10

Ethnicity, Religion and Foreign Policy: Turkish-Syrian Relations since the 1980s

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Introduction

In recent years, religious movements have been increasingly challenging the modernist and secularist ideas formerly dominant globally as well as shaping the foreign policies of states. Especially in the last decade, pro-religious political parties made significant electoral advances in various countries, including the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, ethnic and religious issues have become important parts of public debate and policy and were argued to be prominent in shaping bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria.

Turkish-Syrian relations from the 1980s to 1998 were overshadowed by Syrian backing of the PKK campaign against the Turkish government. After the Adana Agreements of 1998 when Syria ceased support for the PKK, relations began to improve. With Asad's coming to power in 2000 and the AKP's new 'zero-problems' policy toward its neighbours, relations between the two countries became so cordial that some claimed there was a major 'axis shift' in Turkish foreign policy and that Turkey was drifting away from the West by aligning with Syria and Iran particularly due to the Islamist roots of the AKP. Yet, after the Arab uprisings beginning in 2011 and the Syrian government's repression of dissidents, relations between Turkey and Syria greatly deteriorated. The current debate on Turkish foreign policy asks whether this abrupt change is related to Turkey's predominantly Sunni religious identity.

This chapter will examine the basic question: what is the effect of ethnicity and religion on Turkish-Syrian relations? It argues that one of the key factors which affects Turkish-Syrian relations is these two states' dealings with their own domestic ethnic and religious groups such as the Turkish government's treatment of the Kurdish minority and the Alawite-dominated Syrian government's treatment of Syria's Sunni majority, with both governments choosing at key points to use religion and ethnicity against each other.

The chapter begins with a literature review where relevant studies on the issue are discussed. A specific focus is given to the third party intervention literature and ethno-religious conflicts studies since Turkish-Syrian relations are relevant to both areas of inquiry. This part is followed by an analysis of how the irredentist Kurdish

conflict in Turkey and ethno-religious conflict in Syria since 2011 have affected bilateral relations. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

Religion, Ethnicity, Foreign Policy and International Interventions

Since this chapter focuses on how ethnicity and religious differences affect Turkey and Syria's foreign policies *vis à vis* each other, this review examines studies of the internationalization of ethno-religious conflicts.[1] Such studies suggest that ethnic conflicts may lead to violent, often unmanageable interstate conflicts (Carment 1994). However there is no consensus about how ethnic conflicts are internationalized (James and Özdamar 2005). More specifically, 'is ethnic conflict internally generated, then externalized? Do ethnic conflicts weaken state structures and thus invite external intervention or is it a more complex interaction?' (James and Özdamar 2005)

Carment (1993) and Carment and James (1995) suggest that irredentist conflicts, rooted in ethnic strife, such as the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, tend to be the most violent ones and the most likely to escalate into an interstate war. Carment and James (2001) present several hypotheses on the problem.[2] The first is that a shift in the ethnic balance of power within a state may produce ethnic strife. The Yugoslavian case at the beginning of 1990s supports this hypothesis. In Syria, the Uprising since 2011 has produced a similar effect: Asad and his Alawite-dominated government have been hard pressed by the anti-regime mobilization among the Sunni majority community. A second hypothesis is that state structures weakened by such strife invite external meddling, often from a neighbouring country, which escalates conflicts. The Serbian case at the beginning of the 1990s and Somali case in late the 1970s support this hypothesis. The Syrian case, where the government could not provide security or control violence for over a year, costing thousands of lives, seems to have contributed to the Turkish government's unusual involvement in Syria's internal affairs. Similarly, Kaufmann (2001) argues that once the state ceases to protect different ethnic groups in the country, each community mobilizes to protect their own people. This may result in intervention by other states, usually to protect an ethnic group, which internationalizes the conflict. Thousands of Syrian refugees in Turkey may indicate the beginning of a chain of events that will lead to more Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict. Similarly, Van Evera (1994) suggests that ethnic conflict creates security dilemmas for both the ethnic groups and neighbouring states that cause spiral effects, international conflict and external intervention. These studies suggest ethnic strife can even cause a full-scale

[1] This literature review is based mostly on the authors' conference paper entitled 'Religious Discrimination and Patterns of Foreign Policy' presented at the ISA Annual Conference in 2010.

[2] This discussion is adopted from James and Özdamar (2005). See this article for more information on this debate.

war between two states. Turkish-Syrian relations since the Syrian Uprising alarms observers for these reasons. Reasons for intervention, according to Heraclidis (1990) can vary greatly, from purely instrumental to affective, notably those based on shared identity; in our case arguably both reasons are intertwined.

Another hypothesis is that international organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) will serve as vehicles for external meddling by states that plan to intervene to help their brethren. For Heraclides, the international system may influence domestic conflicts in three different ways: it may encourage it, help isolate and suppress it, or encourage reconciliation (Heraclides 1990). Especially during the peak point of the PKK terrorism in the 1990s, the EU and European Parliament's meddling arguably encouraged the PKK insurgency. The Syrian conflict in 2011–2012 shows that different important actors within the international system may also have conflicting aims. For example, while the UN attempted to reach a reconciliation between conflicting parties, Russia seems to care about isolating the conflict and keeping its client government in power in Syria.

Religious affinities are also found in the literature to be important determinants of external intervention and internationalization of conflicts. Religious affinities are quite influential in foreign policy decisions because, as is clear from the literature on identity, religion is a highly salient component of individual and collective identity, shaping perceptions as well as the world-views of believers (Seul 1999, Kinnvall 2004, Voye 1999). Ethno-religious conflicts are known to attract third-party support more often than conflicts between ethnic groups that belong to the same religious tradition (Fox 2001a, Fox et al. 2009). Religious conflicts are considered to be more significant to potential interveners, and those who intervene mostly have religious affinities (and populations that are religiously similar) with the ethnic groups on whose behalf they intervene (Fox 2001b). Fox (et al. 2009: 164-165) suggest that 'religious affinities are particularly strong compared to other forms of identity' and religious affinity could shape the decision to intervene.

Domestic repression of religious groups may cause problems with other states, especially with those states that share the same religious background as the repressed group. This scenario is an important determinant of external intervention and the internationalization of conflicts. For example, as Ghose and James note (2005), religion played an important part in Pakistan's intervention in Kashmir. Armed conflict between the Indian government and Muslim groups in Kashmir induced support for these groups from neighbouring Pakistan, a country with a predominantly Muslim population. Such support resulted in Indian foreign policy reactions, escalating interstate tensions. This pattern is duplicated between Turkey and Syria. There is a connection between Syria's crackdown on the Sunni opposition and its deteriorating relations with Turkey, while the Turkish government's support for the Free Syrian Army may be connected to Turkey's religious affinity with the Sunnis in Syria.

Ethnicity and Turkey-Syria Relations: The Kurdish Issue

This section aims to provide an overview of Syria-Turkey relations with an emphasis on the Kurdish question. The 'Kurdish question' is a never-ending problem for Turkey. The Kurds, mostly spread across Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, have never gained sovereign statehood although some believe they make up a nation. The first Kurdish revolts began during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and continued in the Republic of Turkey such as in 1925, 1930 and 1937–38. Central governments controlled these revolts by military means. With the foundation of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) in 1979 and its terrorist acts beginning in the early 1980s and subsequent escalation in the 1990s, the Kurdish issue became Turkey's most important security problem. Domestically, the legitimacy of the Turkish state was tested and military expenditures weakened the already problematic economy (James and Özdamar 2009). Internationally, Turkey's foreign policy both *vis-a-vis* regional actors and superpowers such as the US and USSR (and later Russia) was defined by this problem.

Turkey was determined to end aid to the PKK from regional governments as well as other international actors such as the US and European governments like Germany. Turkish-Syrian relations were particularly negatively affected by the presence of PKK fighters and their leader Abdullah Öcalan in the country. Over two decades, Turkey made many attempts to persuade the Syrian government to stop giving sanctuary to the PKK and its leader. In this quest, there were several key episodes (Olson 2000 and 2001; also James and Özdamar 2009).

The first was the negotiations in Damascus in 1987 when Turgut Özal was Prime Minister of Turkey. Turkey and Syria signed a security protocol promising to 'obstruct groups engaged in destructive activities directed against one another on their own territory and ... not [to] turn a blind eye to them in any way' (Olson 2000). Syria, as a downstream country, had put the Euphrates water issue on the table and Turkey also agreed to release a certain volume of Euphrates river water to Syria. In these meetings, Syria did not accept that Öcalan was in Damascus and was reluctant to include this factor in negotiations. This agreement was not successful: Syria continued to aid the terrorist organization and Turkey continued to restrict the flow of the Euphrates water into Syria.

The second negotiations came after the Gulf war of 1990. Turkey was keen to prevent a potential Kurdish state emerging as a result of a possible disintegration of Iraq (Altunışık 2004). As the PKK increased its influence and activities, worries increased in Turkey; meanwhile, Syria disputed the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) that established Turkey's control over the flow of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (Jouejati 1996). Turkey expected the GAP project would help to curb the power of the PKK by increasing the prosperity of the predominantly Kurdish population in the southeast.[3] The two countries signed an agreement in 1992 in which they promised to collaborate against armed terrorists and Syria accepted

[3] See Çarkoğlu and Eder (2001a and 2001b) for further discussion.

this designation of the PKK. However, this agreement did not change Syrian behaviour. In return Turkey used the 'water card' against its neighbour.

The early 1990s was the peak of PKK attacks against Turkey since the effects of the Gulf War, such as the waning of Saddam's authority north of the 36th parallel, had allowed it to improve its capabilities. In this context, other regional powers, including Iran and Syria, also became wary of Kurdish ambitions and of the possibility of an independent Kurdistan that would threaten the territorial integrity of all four countries. To prevent the spillover effects of the power vacuum in northern Iraq after the Gulf War, the Turkish, Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers held a conference in which they articulated their governments' opposition to an independent Kurdish state in the region (Olson 2001). However, PKK fighters as well as the leadership continued to use Syrian territory to attack Turkey. In a fourth period, we observe as early as 1994–1995 a preview of the close economic cooperation of the 2000s. Trade negotiations and Turkey's attempts to use the economy and bilateral trade as a 'carrot' had limited success. However, Syria's continued support for PKK activities around the border in Hatay prevented any further improvement in economic or political relations (Olson 2001).

The fifth period is termed by Olson (2001) Turkey's 'undeclared war' against Syria (see also Robins 1996). Damascus and Ankara chose to strengthen their hand against each other by seeking regional alliances. While Syria developed its relations with Armenia, Greece and Iran (Mufti 1998), Turkey got closer to Israel. Turkey and Israel signed a military agreement in April 1996 (Altunışık and Tür 2006). Developing Turkey-Israel cooperation sent shock waves through the Syrian leadership (Bengio and Özcan 2000). As Altunışık and Tür (2006: 136) point out 'Syria and Turkey were locked in a security dilemma and resorted to alliances to deal with it' and 'each alliance decision led to more insecurity on the other side.' The two countries found themselves in a major crisis in this particular strategic environment.

In 1996, Turkey declared that it would exercise its right to respond if Syria did not end its support for the PKK. When Syria did not respond, Turkey froze its relations with the country. As Turkey mobilized its troops on the Syrian border, Syria responded by expelling Öcalan from Syria. On 20 October 1998, the Adana Accords were signed between Syria and Turkey (Altunışık and Tür 2006, Aras and Polat 2008). Under the terms of the agreement, Syria recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization, and agreed to end supplying weapons and support to it. (Aykan 1999) Syria also shut down PKK camps located in the country. In 1999, Öcalan was captured in Kenya, which diminished the security threat of Kurdish separatism to Turkey (Somer 2004). After Syria had stopped meddling in Turkey's ethnic conflict, relations began to normalize. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the fear of Kurdish separatism led policy-makers in the two countries to cooperate against the shared threat.

Turkish-Syrian politics in the 1980s and the 1990s is an ideal case study of how domestic ethnic conflicts become internationalized. A series of domestic and external factors shaped the course of Turkey-Syria relations, although the root of the conflict was Turkey's domestic treatment of its own Kurdish minority. While

ethnic conflicts were the determining factor in this period, *religious* differences between the two countries did not prove to be defining factors at this time: Alawite secularist Asad and Sunni Islamist Erdoğan improved cooperation between their two countries to unprecedented levels.

Sunni Islam, Turkey and the Syrian Uprising since 2011

The Turkish government was caught unprepared by the popular uprisings in Arab countries that started in early 2011. Prime Minister Erdoğan was initially reluctant to accept NATO intervention in Libya since Turkish firms had received many Libyan government contracts in the country. As Turkey's traditional allies in NATO became convinced intervention was necessary, the Turkish government changed its position and joined the NATO coalition against Qaddafi. The Erdoğan government also changed its rhetoric and took a clear position in favour of toppling dictators in the Middle East. In September 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Egypt, Libya and Tunisia during which he strengthened Turkey's position on democratization and reforms in the Middle East.

Ethnic, religious and ideological factors also contributed to the change of position by the Turkish government, although they were not the most important factors. The AKP was established by representatives of the Islamist Welfare Party's 'reformist wing' in 2001. Although the AKP has successfully positioned itself at the centre right of Turkish politics, the most influential leadership of the party has been the Islamist elite from the former Welfare Party and the Virtue party which were overtly Islamist. Turkish political Islam is largely influenced by the traditional Sunni religious and political teachings as well as its 20th century thinkers such as Sayyd Qutb and Hasan al-Banna. Therefore as the Arab uprisings unfolded the Islamist elite in the AKP may have thought that more friendly and ideologically-kindred governments could come to power in all Arab Spring countries. For example, both in Tunisia and Egypt, Ennahda leader, Ghannouchi, and Muhammed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party seem ideologically close to the AKP and to its understanding of Islam and democracy. Although it is very difficult to provide hard evidence for it, one may argue that the AKP leadership must have calculated that the end result of the Arab uprisings would be a friendlier Middle East for the government in Ankara.

Therefore, when the Syrian Uprising started, Turkey had already changed its position clearly against the Arab dictatorships and in favour of democratic reforms in Arab Spring countries. Yet, Turkey did not immediately turn its back on Asad. Rather, Turkey's advice for reforms, democratization and free elections as a solution to the crisis in Syria were formally communicated to Asad in state-to-state meetings during the spring and summer of 2011. Perhaps the last meeting held in August 2011 was the breaking point in relations between the two governments. In this meeting, the differences in opinion about how to deal with the Uprising in Syria was apparent and President Asad's very distant treatment of Foreign

Minister Davutoğlu was perceived as signifying the end of a decade of cordial relations between Syria and Turkey.

After this, the Turkish government took a very strong position against Asad's government and openly declared that it should 'go'. The Turkish government also began implementing this policy by mobilizing the international community, media and public opinion as well as by allowing operations by Syrian insurgents in southern Turkey at the Syrian border, allegedly in cooperation with the CIA, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Schmitt 2012). Asad's regime, in this period, had become more and more ruthless and reportedly 20,000 civilians and government forces died in its effort to hold on to power. The peak of tensions between two countries appeared when a Turkish reconnaissance jet was allegedly shot down by Syrian air defences on 22 June 2012.

Religion and ethno-religious ties partially explain Turkey's support for the rebels in Syria. It would be stretching matters too far to argue that Turkey turned against Asad due to sectarian reasons, as this would not be able to account for the cordial relations between the AKP and Asad governments from 2002 to 2011. Once Turkey's security concerns were met by the Syrians in the post-1998 period and the Syrian government's concerns about the Euphrates River was resolved, both governments disregarded ethnic and religious differences and cooperated in political, economic and security areas. However, when relations were negatively affected by material conflicts, the AKP's affective ties to Syrian opposition groups helped the government to organize the opposition in Syria against Asad's regime. The fact that the Asad regime is Alawite-dominated and most opposition groups include Sunni Syrians helped the AKP government to mobilize its own base and most of the Turkish public opinion against Syria. Many news and official speeches referred to the sectarian nature of the conflict. In fact, the pro-government media used this sectarian divide against the main opposition party, the CHP (*Republican People's Party*, centre left) and its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had criticized the AKP's strong stance against the Syrian regime; he was accused of sectarianism since Kılıçdaroğlu himself is an Alawite[4] and for ignoring the horrible atrocities committed by Bashar al-Asad.

On the other hand, it seems that the dominant opinion in Damascus is that the Turkish government turned against it for sectarian reasons. After the downing of the Turkish F4 jet, a Turkish journalist from the daily *Cumhuriyet* conducted a very high-profile interview with Asad in Damascus. In this interview Asad openly blamed Erdoğan for acting out of sectarian motives. He also suggested that relations with the Erdoğan government had always been difficult due to Erdoğan's 'extreme interest' in the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Asad suggested that even when relations were at its peak, Erdoğan was more interested in improving the Muslim Brotherhood's position in Syria than improving Turkish-Syrian relations (Çakırözer 2012).

[4] Alawites in Turkey and Syrian Alawites or Nusayris are, however, quite different.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests ethnic and religious ties and issues are important in understanding Syria-Turkey relations but also that they are secondary factors since in both countries successive governments have put traditional policy concerns such as security and economic relations at the top of their agenda in dealing with each other. The 'golden period', from 2000 to 2011 demonstrated that the two neighbours, despite ethnic and religious differences, were capable of cooperating in most important policy areas such as security, trade or regional governance.

However, ethnic and religious issues may intervene in relations and may be utilized by governments when their material or security interests clash. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Syrian government gave strong support to an ethnically irredentist terrorist group in Turkey – the PKK – against successive Turkish governments, not out of ethnic affinity or shared identity, but as a 'card' against Turkey's regional policies and its control of the Euphrates waters. In 2011–2012, when relations were exacerbated by the Asad regime's ruthless crackdown on civilians in Syria, the Turkish government used the fact that most of the people killed by Syrian government forces were Sunnis to mobilize its base and public opinion against the Syrian regime. It seems ethnic and religious divides and issues in both countries are used as 'practical tools' by governments against each other when relations fail in other policy areas such as security.

In a region like the Middle East where ethnic and religious identities are powerful societal forces, the task for researchers is to identify the specific mechanisms that convert these identities into political mobilization and policy tools. Domestically, ethno-religious cleavages have a powerful impact in shaping the social bases of political parties and movements. In foreign policy, all Middle Eastern governments seem to be aware of the power of identity-related discourses in foreign policy and of how rivals can use identity issues against each other in their struggles for power. Including domestic identity-related variables in the study of foreign policy seems, therefore, like a profitable strategy for analysts of the Middle East's international relations.